

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 IO-13 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05
H-01 INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01
SP-02 SS-15 NSCE-00 SSO-00 USIE-00 INRE-00 ACDA-07
OMB-01 TRSE-00 SSM-03 NEAE-00 /087 W
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FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7651
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY LONDON
USMISSION USUN NY
USMISSION SINAI
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 TEL AVIV 5857

E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PBOR, IS
SUBJECT: BEGIN'S DECISION TO LEGITIMIZE THREE WEST BANK SETTLEMENTS

REF: TEL AVIV 5541

BEGIN SUMMARY: THE GOVERNMENT'S SUDDEN ANNOUNCEMENT
JULY 26 THAT IT WAS LEGALIZING THREE WEST BANK SETTLEMENTS
CLEARED UP A BIT OF UNFINISHED BUSINESS LEFT BY THE RABIN
GOVERNMENT, REAFFIRMED BEGIN'S COMMITMENT TO ONE OF
HIS BASIC TENETS, AND ABOVE ALL PLACATED HIS RIGHT-WING
CONSTITUENCY BEFORE IT BECAME TOO RESTLESS. SEEN IN THIS
LIGHT, IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN THE LEAST HE COULD DO IF, IN FACT,
HE INTENDS A MORATORIUM ON FURTHER SETTLEMENT ACTIVITY
FOR THE TIME BEING. END SUMMARY

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1. THE UNEXPECTED. THE GOVERNMENT'S DECISION TO GIVE
LEGAL STATUS TO THE SETTLEMENTS AT QADOUM, OFRA,
AND MA'ALE ADUMIM CAME AS A SURPRISE TO MOST
ISRAELIS. IT HAD BEEN WIDELY ASSUMED THAT BEGIN
HAD BEEN ASKED BY THE PRESIDENT NOT TO CARRY OUT
ANY FURTHER SETTLEMENT ACTIVITIES UNTIL AFTER THE
SECRETARY'S VISIT AND/OR AFTER GENEVA. AS RECENTLY

AS THE MORNING BEFORE THE ANNOUNCEMENT, RADIO ISRAEL REPORTED THAT IT HAD BEEN LEARNED "FROM A SENIOR GOVERNMENT SOURCE" THAT THE GOVERNMENT WOULD PROBABLY RESPOND TO THE U.S. PRESIDENT'S REQUEST THAT UNTIL THE COVENING OF THE GENEVA CONFERENCE IN OCTOBER, NO NEW SETTLEMENTS BE ESTABLISHED IN JUDEA AND SAMARIA. THE REPORT WENT ON TO NOTE THAT THE MINISTERIAL COMMITTEE FOR SETTLEMENT AFFAIRS WOULD MEET THAT MORNING AND WAS EXPECTED TO TAKE A FORMAL DECISION TO THAT EFFECT. THE COMMITTEE DID MEET, BUT ITS DECISION WAS ENTIRELY DIFFERENT.

2. SUPPORTERS OF THE GOVERNMENT QUICKLY RECOVERED FROM THEIR MOMENTARY SURPRISE AND POINTED OUT THAT THE GOVERNMENT'S DECISION DID NOTHING MORE THAN CONFIRM AN ALREADY EXISTING SITUATION. THE THREE SETTLEMENTS HAVE BEEN AROUND FOR A YEAR AND A HALF OR MORE AND WERE IN THE PROCESS OF ACQUIRING PERMANENCE. THEREFORE, THESE SUPPORTERS ARGUE, NO PARTICULAR IMPORTANCE SHOULD BE ATTACHED TO WHAT THE GOVERNMENT HAS DONE; IT DOES NOT CONSTITUTE NEW POLICY. WHY WAS EVERYONE SO EXCITED?

3. OTHERS HAVE OPENLY ADMITTED THEIR BEWILDERMENT AT THE GOVERNMENT'S ACTION. MFA OFFICIALS TOLD US PREVATELY THAT THEY WERE SURPRISED AND CONFUSED
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AT THE TIMING OF THE DECISION, OCCURRING AS IT DID JUST AFTER BEGIN'S WASHINGTON VISIT, WITH THE PRESIDENT'S WELL PUBLICIZED REQUEST FOR A MORATORIUM, AND JUST PRIOR TO THE SECRETARY'S VISIT TO THE MIDDLE EAST. LESS INHIBITEDLY, MEDIA REPRESENTATIVES HAVE MADE THE SAME POINT TO US.

4. TIMING. IT IS ON THIS POINT THAT BEGIN HAS BEEN WIDELY CRITICIZED. AWARE OF HIS STRONG COMMITMENT TO THE RIGHT OF JEWS TO SETTLE ANYWHERE IN THE "LAND OF ISRAEL", IT WAS THEREFORE NOT THE ACT BUT ITS TIMING WHICH RAISED EYEBROWS AND EVOKED CONCERN FOR GEGIN'S STILL FRESH RAPPORT WITH PRESIDENT CARTER. ONE INTERPRETATION THAT GAINED LIMITED CURRENCY CENTERED AROUND THE LEGITIMIZATION AS A GESTURE OF INDEPENENCE--BEGIN WANTED TO SHOW WASHINGTON THAT HE WILL NOT BE PRESSURED ON SETTLEMENTS AND THE ACTION, WHICH HE KNEW WOULD BE RECEIVED UNFAVORABLY IN THE U.S., WAS TAKEN SO SOON IN ORDER TO ADD DRAMATIC EFFECT TO THE GESTURE. IN OUR VIEW THIS INTERPRETATION SHORTCHANGES THE VALUE BEGIN PLACES ON HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH

CARTER. WHILE THE PRIME MINISTER MAY HAVE DECIDED THAT HE CANNOT ACCEPT A MORATORIUM, OTHER THINGS BEING EQUAL, HE WILL GO TO GREAT PAINS TO PRESERVE THE REALITY AND THE APPREARANCE OF A SPECIAL TIE WITH THE PRESIDENT. WE DO NOT BELIEVE THAT THE TIMING WAS INTENDED AS AN ACT OF DEFIANCE AGAINST THE U.S.

5. ON THE TIMING ISSUE, BEGIN'S DEFENDERS MAINTAIN THAT IT IS AN IRRELEVANT POINT. THEY ARGUE THAT IF MAKING THE DECISION SHORTLY AFTER BEGIN'S RETURN FROM WASHINGTON IS SEEN AS AN UNFAVORABLE TIME, THE TIMING OF SUCH A DECISION IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE SECRETARY'S VISIT TO THE MIDDLE EAST WOULD ALSO CONFIDENTIAL

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BE UNFAVORABLE, AS IT WOULD DURING THE PERIOD PRECEDING A MEETING IN GENEVA, DURING A GENEVA CONFERENCE, ETC. IT IS RECALLED THAT THE TIMING OF THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE APPOINTMENT OF DAYAN AS FOREIGN MINISTER WAS ALSO CRITICIZED; ULTIMATELY IT WAS RECOGNIZED THAT AN EARLY AND ABRUPT ANNOUNCEMENT WAS PROBABLY THE BEST WAY TO HANDLE A DECISION WHICH WAS EXPECTED TO PROVOKE CONTROVERSY. THE QUICK SURGICAL ACT SEEMS TO BE BEGIN'S STYLE ONCE HIS MIND IS MADE UP.

6. UNFINISHED BUSINESS. ALONG WITH OTHERS, BEGIN MAY HAVE VIEWED THE STATUS OF THE THREE SETTLEMENTS AS A BIT OF UNFINISHED BUSINESS WHICH HAD BEEN LEFT OVER FROM THE RABIN ADMINISTRATION. BEGIN HAD LONG SUPPORTED THE LEGITIMIZATION OF THE SETTLEMENT AT QADOUM AND HE CLEARLY SIGNALLED THAT SUPPORT IN HIS SPEECH AT A RELIGIOUS CEREMONY THERE TWO DAYS AFTER HIS ELECTION. THE STEP OF RECOGNIZING THE THREE SETTLEMENTS IS SOMETHING WHICH BEGIN PROBABLY FELT HE HAD TO GET OUT OF HIS SYSTEM EARLY IN HIS ADMINISTRATION.

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7. PRESSURE FROM THE RIGHT. FOR ONE THING BEGIN HAS BEEN UNDER PRESSURE ON THE SETTLEMENTS ISSUE FROM HIS RIGHT WING, SPECIFICALLY, GUSH EMUNIM. THE LATTER CERTAINLY DO NOT EXPECT LESS FROM BEGIN THAN THEY WRESTED, AT LEAST DE FACTO, FROM RABIN. THE GUSH VIEWS THE CURRENT COALITION AS "THEIR" GOVERNMENT. THEY HAVE A KINDRED SOUL IN GEGIN (ONE GUSH LEADER TOLD US HE COULD SEE BEGIN ANY TIME ON VERY SHORT NOTICE) AS WELL AS A DIRECT LINE TO THE NRP; ARIK SHARON IS ANOTHER OF THEIR CLOSE FRIENDS IN THIS GOVERNMENT. THERE ARE ALREADY INDICATIONS OF IMPATIENCE AMONG GUSH ADHERENTS WITH THE LACK OF SETTLEMENT ACTIVITY BY THE NEW GOVERNMENT. WRITING IN DAVAR. DANNY BLOCH SAID BEGIN CAME UNDER HEAVY PRESSURE FROM THE GUSH AND A GROUP OF TEN MKS (UNAMED) WHO
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WARNED HIM THAT UNLESS HE MOVED IMMEDIATELY REGARDING THE THREE SETTLEMENTS, THEY WOULD TAKE INDEPENDENT ACTION. GUSH RESTIVENESS IN THE FORM OF OPEN CRITICISM, A DEMONSTRATION, OR EVEN AN UNAUTHORIZED ATTEMPT AT SETTLEMENT WOULD BE A MAJOR EMBARRASSMENT TO BEGIN. IF THE PRIME MINISTER INTENDS ANY KIND OF A MORATORIUM, EVEN FOR A SHORT TIME, HE MAY WELL CONSIDER THAT LEGITIMIZING THE SETTLEMENTS WOULD BE A SMALL PRICE TO PAY TO KEEP THE GUSH AND THE NRP PACIFIED.

8. THE PRIME MINISTER MAY NOT YET, IN FACT, HAVE MADE A DECISION ON POSTPONING SETTLEMENT ACTIVITY. HE MIGHT BE STILL TESTING THE WATER. IF HE IS ABLE TO KEEP THE SETTLEMENT HARDLINERS WITHIN HIS CONSTITUENCY TEMPORARILY HAPPY BY GIVING LEGAL STATUS TO THREE EXISTING SETTLEMENTS, SO MUCH THE BETTER. IN THE MEANTIME, HE HAS FOLLOWED UP ON THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF LEGITIMIZATION BY REINFORCING, IN HIS REPORT TO THE KNESSET ON HIS U.S. VISIT, THE STATUS AND AUTHORITY OF THE MINISTERIAL COMMITTEE ON SETTLEMENT AFFAIRS HEADED BY SHARON. BEGIN'S REMARKS DISTURBED THE DMC, WHICH HAD BEEN ASSURED DURING THE RECENTLY ABORTED COALITION NEGOTIATIONS, THAT THE KNESSET'S FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND SECURITY COMMITTEE WOULD HAVE THE LAST WORD ON SETTLEMENTS IF DEMANDED BY ANY CABINET MEMBER. BUT BY THEN BEGIN HAD PROBABLY ALREADY DISCOUNTED THE POSSIBILITY OF THE DMC COMING INTO THE COALITION IN THE NEAR FUTURE.

9. CONCLUSION. A NUMBER OF JOURNALISTS HAVE
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COMMENTED TO US THAT BEGIN HAS MADE TWO MISTAKES WHICH TARNISHED THE IMAGE HE WAS ABLE TO CREATE WITH HIS SUCCESSFUL WASHINGTON VISIT: HIS ATTACK ON THE OPPOSITION IN HIS AIRPORT STATEMENT ON HIS RETURN FOR LEAKING HIS "PLAN," AND THE SETTLEMENTS DECISION WHICH THEY INTERPRETED AS A REBUKE TO PRESIDENT CARTER. WITH THE PASSAGE OF TIME THE SECOND "MISTAKE" LOOKS MORE TO HAVE BEEN A CAREFULLY CALCULATED MOVE BY BEGIN REPRESENTING THE MINIMUM GESTURE REQUIRED OF HIM IN THE AREA OF SETTLEMENTS. IT COULD BE FOLLOWED SOON BY MORE SUBSTANTIAL SETTLEMENT ACTIVITY ON THE WEST BANK. BUT IF THE PRIME MINISTER MEANS TO POSTPONE AUTHORIZING ANY NEW SETTLEMENTS AT LEAST UNTIL THE GENEVA CONFERENCE RESUMES, GIVEN THE PRESSURES WITHIN HIS COALITION AND IN HIS BROADER CONSTITUENCY, LEGALIZING THREE EXISTING SETTLEMENTS WAS THE LEAST HE COULD HAVE DONE.

10. THIS IS NOT TO SAY THAT BEGIN IS A WEAK PRIME MINISTER WHO HAS SUBMITTED, AGAINST HIS WISHES, TO PRESSURE FROM GUSH EMUNIM TO ADOPT A POLICY HE OPPOSES. HE REMAINS, IN OUR JUDGEMENT, A STRONG LEADER FIRMLY IN CONTROL OF HIS CABINET, HE HAS TAKEN A STEP WHICH WAS URGED BY A HIGHLY MOTIVATED AND VOCAL GROUP; IT HAPPENED, HOWEVER,

TO COINCIDE WITH HIS OWN STRONGLY HELD VIEWS.LEWIS

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